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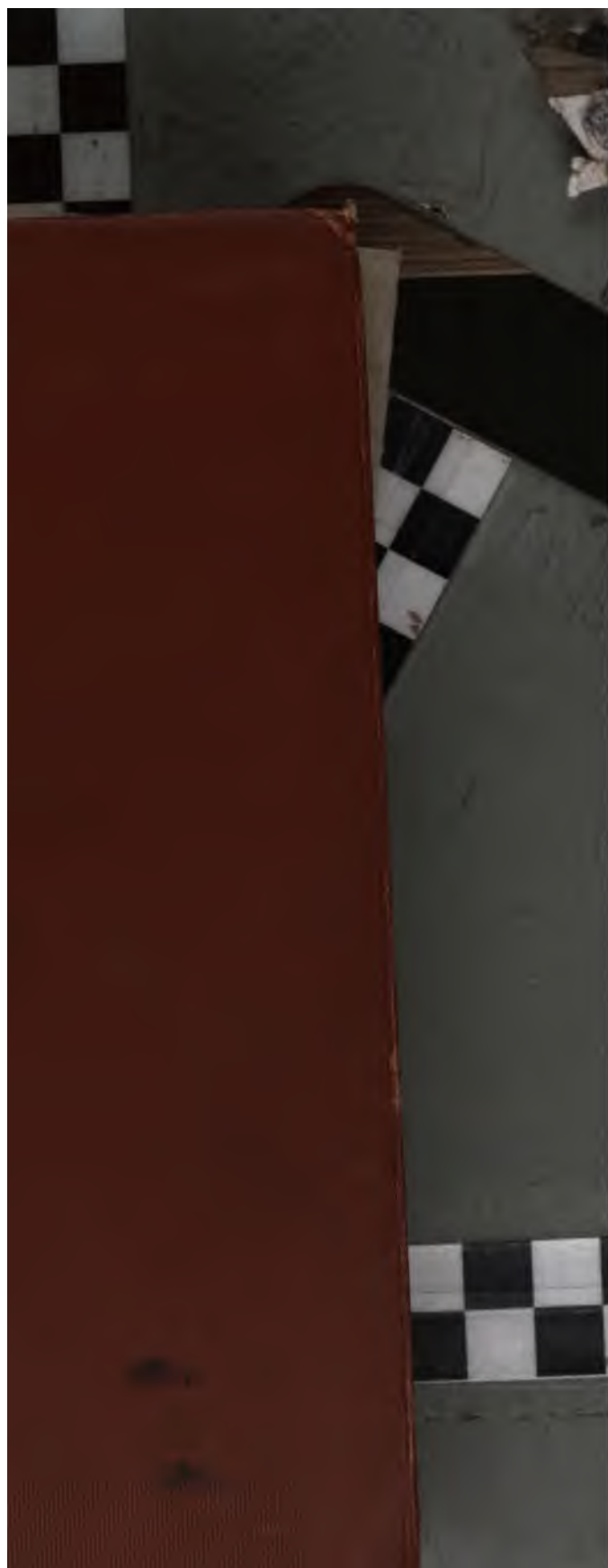
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donors, and is thus rather a collection of buildings than an harmonious whole. But it is picturesque in grouping, lying round three sides of a fine, open piazza, and though large enough to accommodate over a hundred brothers, it is simple and unobtrusive. In the fifteenth century it was partially destroyed by fire, and in the same century suffered desecration during the wars between the rival states of Venice and Florence. During the last century, also, the brothers were disturbed by threatened and enforced dissolution. They continue now in peaceful possession on sufferance of the convent's present owner, who has it on lease from the municipality of Florence.

The Guardian, Padre Saturnino da Caprese¹ is a man of unusual cultivation and large-minded courtesy, eager to welcome and shelter visitors; unstinted hospitality is shown to all pilgrims of whatever degree.

Further description of the commemorative buildings, which, though early, were subsequent to the first settlement, and of the convent itself, would not help us to reconstruct the original scene. The existence of the buildings and the attendant modi-

¹ His *Guida Illustrata della Verna* contains a detailed account of the present convent and its surroundings, the historical and traditional events connected with it, and a complete list of the flora of the mountain.



CHAPEL ON LA VERNA

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fications of the mountain's natural ruggedness make the nature of its appeal to S. Francis more difficult to estimate, but our main work must lie in an attempt to re-create the conditions he knew, and to set them as background to the traditions of his sojourn there.

One of the most significant episodes of Francis' life is the account of his meeting with Orlando da Chiusi and the gift of La Verna. It is significant, because this mountain, the most glorious material possession of the Poverello, was the scene of his most intense and intimate spiritual experience. The incident is assigned by the *Fioretti* to the year 1224, when Francis was forty-three years of age. This was undoubtedly the date of his last visit to La Verna, when he received the impression of the Stigmata; but a deed drawn up in 1274 by Orlando's sons, assigning 1213 as the date of his gift, proves conclusively that the meeting at S. Leo took place at least eleven years earlier than the date assigned to it in the *Fioretti*, and incidentally that the visit of 1224 was not Francis' first visit. The confusion is, however, explained, if we remember that the considerations of the Holy Stigmata, which form a kind of appendix to the *Fioretti*, are intended rather as a devotional exercise than as an historic document. The writer has, of course, obscured his aim by allowing himself to introduce a specification of

date which is out of place in such a treatise, but it is easy to see that he is using his material with the freedom of an artist, combining in one canvas, for the enrichment of his central theme, the scattered scenes of a prolonged experience. He relates one visit only, and that the last and most vital, of S. Francis to La Verna; round that visit he groups incidents which plainly belong to various dates.

We gather from this source that Francis was journeying from the valley of Spoleto to the province of Romagna, in company with brother Leo; and as they journeyed, they passed on foot by the citadel¹ of Montefeltro, now known as S. Leo.

This little town, lying some miles to the south-west of S. Marino, is one of the most remarkable features of Central Italy. In the midst of a country distinguished by its natural rocky fortresses rising with startling abruptness from the wild mountain valleys and tablelands around, it is

¹ The Italian "castello," like the Latin "castrum," has no exact equivalent in English. It survives only as a suffix which has lost its significance, in such names as Doncaster. The reality, however, still exists throughout Italy. In the Tiber valley, and notably in the Marches and Romagna, every eminence bears its stronghold whose solid masonry is knit fast with the natural rock. It appears, often up to the very gate, like the single castle from which it takes its name, consisting originally of the fortress of some noble, that enclosed for defence within its walls the homes of his dependants.



SAN LEO

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the most remarkable of all. The castle of S. Leo, still used as a military station, is set on the summit of a precipitous headland, at the extremity of a line of sharp, rocky cliffs of the same nature, though less pronounced. It is a rock of really stupendous proportions, rising from the land with a sheer and naked majesty with which few cliffs rise from the sea, and the meadowland breaks in green waves round its base. Approaching from S. Marino to the naked face of barren, rigid rock, and winding through the single gate up the steep paved street, the first feeling is of compelled submission to power rather than of glad subjection to beauty; but the southern slopes of the miniature plateau are gentler in aspect, enringing the little town in a crescent of meadow-green.¹

¹ From this southern slope can be seen the former convent of Santigne, founded by S. Francis. It stands about a mile from S. Leo, on a hillside considerably below the level of the citadel, and is approached by a rough track, bordered by bracken and wild flowers, on the outskirts of an oak wood, which rises behind the convent, sheltering it from the north. The chapel is still in use for services, but since its suppression under Napoleon I. the convent buildings have fallen out of repair, and are now inhabited by peasants.

According to Mariotti, a tradition current at S. Leo assigns the following origin to the name Santigne :—

“Once when the holy man had set out walking with his companions during a very dark night, and had lost his way, nor could find any manner of outlet from the dense wooded undergrowth,

S. Leo cannot have changed very much since the memorable day when Francis and Leo passed by, and at Francis' suggestion mounted up the steep road to take part in some festivities within the gates. The noble duomo, still intact from renovation, may have been already completed. The little church of the Pieve, close beside it, had certainly existed for several hundred years, and the piazza on which Francis preached still crowns the single street. A great company had assembled at S. Leo to assist at the knighting of one of its counts. Francis' early associations, and the chivalrous instincts which long survived them, would lead him to take special delight in such a ceremony. To this was added his hope of gathering "some good spiritual fruit." It is worth while to transcribe in full the picturesque account given in the *Fioretti* of his meeting with Orlando.

"Among the other gentlemen of that country

there shone suddenly down from the heights above him a flame of exceeding brightness, so that, walking in the light of it, and by its radiance, they escaped from every peril, and reached a safe and convenient place, where they spent the rest of the night, after giving thanks to God for His exceeding grace. In memory of which the holy father, when he had obtained that site from the Commune of the place for the building of a convent, desired that it should be called Sant' Igne (holy fire), by which name it has always been called and is still called, though one word has been made out of two—Santigne."

who had come to join that knightly company was a great and, moreover, a rich gentleman of Tuscany, by name Orlando da Chiusi of Casentino, who, for the marvellous things he had heard of the holiness and the miracles of S. Francis, bore much devotion to him, and had a great desire to see him and hear him preach. Coming to the castle, S. Francis entered in and went up to the piazza where all the company of gentlemen were assembled; and in fervour of spirit he mounted on a low wall and began to preach, choosing for the text of his sermon these words in the vulgar tongue :—

‘Tanto è il bene ch’io aspetto,
Ch’ogni pena m’è diletto.’

And on this text, by the guidance of the Holy Spirit, he preached so devoutly and so profoundly . . . that everyone stood with eyes and mind fixed upon him, and listened as if an angel of God were speaking; among whom, the said Orlando, whose heart was touched by God through the marvellous preaching of S. Francis, resolved to commune and reason with him after the sermon of the things of his soul. So when the sermon was done he drew S. Francis aside and said to him: ‘O father, I would commune with you touching my soul’s health.’ S. Francis replied: ‘It pleases me well; but go this morning and do honour to your friends

who have invited you to the feast, and dine with them.' And after dinner he returned to S. Francis and set before him fully the things of his soul. And at the end this lord Orlando said to S. Francis: 'I have a mountain in Tuscany, most meet for devotion, which is called the mountain of La Verna,¹ and it is very solitary and perfectly fitted for anyone who should wish to do penance in a place far remote from men, or for anyone who desires a solitary life. If it pleased you, I would gladly give it to you and your companions for my soul's health.' S. Francis, hearing so liberal an offer of a thing which he greatly desired, rejoiced exceedingly on this account, and praising and thanking

¹ The name may perhaps be translated "Mountain of Spring." Its association with "inverno" or any derivative of the winter season is obscure, but no one who has spent some days of early spring in the beech woods which clothe the mountain to its summit, can doubt the truth of its spring title. It seems the very incarnation of the season in a barren place. Padre Saturnino,* the present guardian of the convent, rejects this etymology as too fanciful, and prefers to derive Verna from Herna, which in the Italian and Marsian tongues signified rocks. He notes that Ernici, Ernia, Vernia, and Ierna are frequently applied to mountainous places, and quotes Virgil: "Hernica saxa colunt," and the comment of Servius: "Sabinorum lingua saxa hernæ vocantur. Quidam dux Magnus Sabinus de suis locis elicit, et habitare secum fecit saxosis in montibus. Unde dicta sunt Hernica loco et populi Hernici." The relation between H, V and the Æolic digamma F, is sufficient to establish the suggested etymology.

* *Guida Illustrata della Verna.* Prato, 1902.

first God and then Messer Orlando, he spoke thus to him : ' Messer Orlando, when you have returned to your house I will send to you some of my companions, and you will show them this mountain ; and if it seem to them apt for prayer and penitence, I will accept your gracious offer on the spot.' And when he had said this S. Francis departed, and when he had brought his journey to an end he returned to S. Maria degli Angeli ; and likewise Messer Orlando, when the festivities of that company were over, returned to his castle, which was called Chiusi, only a mile distant from La Verna."

There is a subtle kinship between the abrupt rocky heights of this district of Romagna and the wood-crowned peak of the Casentino. In several instances the impression of resemblance is strong, though almost too elusive for analysis : the formation of the heights, and above all the sweeping effects of mountain horizon from their summits, is sufficiently similar to relate them, and it may well be that Orlando, listening to Francis' frank delight in the soaring, natural strongholds among which he had just passed, was reminded of the still more exalted and more lovely solitude which lay within his gift, and rejoiced in the thought of securing the near presence of a man whom report had already endeared to him, and to whom contact had bound him in an intuitive act of homage.

Francis was always a prince among men, now in his renunciation as earlier in his assertion of leadership; high and low fell under the spell of his personality, and he received with a gracious dignity which was truly kingly the service and affection so naturally and spontaneously offered. In his boyish dreams of glory it was himself in identification with an idea, not in the narrow limits of a personality, that he exalted; and he who harbours no dream of self, never fears to receive the worship which springs to enthrone beauty wherever sight is quickened to perceive it. Thus we never read that Francis shrank from proffered allegiance, or from material gifts, when the giver had so far entered into his mystic reading of himself in relation to his mission, as to give through rather than to him. We cannot too much applaud the tact and insight of Orlando, who, after this single meeting, offered his mountain not to the individual Francis, but impersonally to "whoever should wish to do penance," and as if for his own soul's health rather than for the gratification of his newly made friend. So offered Francis had no scruples. He who had left the cell at Sarteano, which he had chanced to hear designated as his, accepts the gift of the mountain with the unhesitating joy of a child. There is something which kindles the imagination in this gift of a mountain, and something in the natura

and unsurprised spontaneity of Francis' acceptance, which recalls the days of his royal visions. We lament the silence of history concerning the courtly Orlando, who was so wise and so cunning a dispenser of his bounties.

Then follows in the *Fioretti*, the mission of two brothers to La Verna under escort of Orlando, who was overwhelmed with joy at their coming. "And he, wishing to show them the mountain of La Verna, sent with them accordingly at least fifty armed men to defend them against wild beasts: and thus accompanied, these brothers ascended the mountain and searched diligently; and at last they came to a part of the mountain well suited to devout contemplation; and in this part there was a level space; and they chose that place for their own habitation and for Francis; and with the help of the armed men who were with them, they together made a sort of rude cell of the branches of trees, and so they accepted in God's name, and took possession of the mountain of La Verna and the place of the brothers in that mountain; and they departed and returned to S. Francis."

Very little time was allowed to elapse between the return of the Brothers with their enthusiastic account, and Francis' own departure. He was filled with joy at the success of their mission, and longed to enter on his new possession. The plan was speedily

formed of consecrating the mountain by celebrating there the fast of S. Michael, which was just about to begin. So he set out with three companions, Angelo Tancredi, Masseo, and Leo, deputing to Masseo the post of guardian and general director on the journey. In this case the office of administrator was a nominal one: the little company were to follow no predetermined rule, nor to take thought for food, drink or shelter, that their mind might be free from all material anxieties, trusting to God and the courtesy of their fellow-men to supply their needs. And in those parts of Italy where the foreigner has not yet imposed his standard and circulated his coin, such confidence is rarely misplaced. The appearance of a dwelling, however humble, is a sure guarantee of shelter and refreshment, proffered with eager and ungrudging hospitality. But the road to La Verna was long, and in many parts altogether uninhabited; on the second night, the *Fioretti* records that partly from fatigue, partly on account of the bad weather, the Brothers could not reach a hermitage nor any town or village, but were obliged to shelter for the night in a deserted church, no doubt without the meal which they were to beg "at the hour of sheltering." But Francis' weariness could not find rest in sleep: his devotions are related by the *Fioretti* in merely conventional terms; we know only that, after a night of wakeful

agitation, he was too worn to face the long day's march on foot, and did not oppose his companions' decision to obtain an ass for him. They asked the loan of it from a poor labourer, who, hearing mention of brother Francis, and noticing perhaps the rude dress of the Brothers, asked them if they were followers of that brother of Assisi of whom so much good was told. Hearing that it was the same Francis for whom they were asking the ass, he made ready his beast and went with the Brothers. Then follows the episode eminently characteristic of Francis, and permanently characteristic also of the Italian peasant, who as host or guide deems he holds a brief for all questioning, and for a sage admixture of advice. The peasant defined the responsibilities of a saintly reputation with an acuteness which delighted Francis. "And when they had gone a little way, the peasant said to Francis: 'Say, are you brother Francis of Assisi?' S. Francis replied that he was. 'Try then,' said the peasant, 'to be as good as all men hold you to be, for many have great faith in you; and so I exhort you that there be nothing found in you but what men hope to find.' S. Francis, hearing these words, did not disdain to be admonished by a peasant, and did not say within himself: 'What beast is this who gives me advice?' as many proud folk who wear the cowl would say now; but he at once threw himself from

off his ass and knelt before him and kissed his feet, and thanked him right humbly for having deigned thus lovingly to admonish him."

But Francis was soon called on to prove the practical efficacy as well as the sincerity of saintship. The little company had accomplished only half of the long ascent which on all sides leads from the plain to the great tableland beneath La Verna, when the peasant's energies gave out, and he began loudly to call on Francis to supply his parching thirst. Giotto has immortalised the discovery of the spring in one of the most simple and moving of his frescoes.¹ His landscape is, of course, conventional, but it nevertheless may be said fairly to symbolise the bare inhospitable rock of the traditional site midway between Rassina and La Verna. The stony mountain slopes are sparsely wooded in parts, but large stretches of the plateau are barren and apparently incapable of cultivation, and the sun beats down mercilessly through the long summer days on the wastes of loose shale, which in the heat of noon burns the sight almost torturingly.

Vasari's description of La Verna as a savage desert, though doubtless based on hearsay, and certainly most inapplicable to the wooded peak, which alone is truly La Verna, not ineptly expresses the sense of naked isolation which creeps

¹ In the Upper Church of S. Francesco at Assisi.

over one at midday up the stony path from Rassina.

Seeing that Orlando did not send to welcome Francis till the day following his arrival, we are at liberty to suppose that the travellers halted after the discovery of the spring, and did not finish their journey till the cooler airs had begun to creep round them. From this point La Verna would be ever before them, towering above the surrounding heights, but still unrevealed in beauty; it is seen only as a great dark-crested rock dominating the solitudes, but it casts its influence far down to meet the wanderer who towards sunset makes it his bourne.

Up the steep road¹ he climbs, still stepping into daylight, while the evening shadows are blurring the outline of the lesser hills. Looking back, he sees peak after peak rising behind as he mounts into the upper air, quickening visions of undreamed expanse and unvoiced solitudes. We can picture the joy with which Francis passed for the first time from the dusty, toilsome road into the marvellous calm of his wooded solitude. A

¹ The road from Bibbiena, winding up rocky and wooded slopes from a deep river valley, is incomparably more beautiful than the road or track from Rassina, which, coming from Arezzo, was the way generally taken by Francis, the former road being of much later formation. Bibbiena, 12 kilometres distant, is the nearest point on the railway to La Verna.

magic circle seems drawn round the base of the great rock. The soil is no longer barren, but covered with green, soft turf. Flowers grow in abundance among the meadow grass, watered by gently trickling freshets, and the glorious woods creep down to shelter them. The convent buildings peer over the precipitous ramparts of La Verna, and above them the solemn woods are preserved in all their beauty, guarded as a sacred thing from the ravages of the profane woodman whose hand is too evident in all the country-side. Convents have everywhere rendered this inestimable protective service to the trees of Italy. Where they are found there is sanctuary for trees and birds. It is impossible to describe the sense of uniqueness inspired by this incomparable wooded solitude. The trees have gained a sacramental majesty from the transcendent solemnity of their position. They do not confine, they humble yet exalt the spirit. They are no dark sun-reft anchorites; the sun's morning and evening beams penetrate their depths. At his rising, he streams through the beeches round the mountain's base, bathing the sight in translucent green. And at sunset the upper heights are illumined. The lower woods lie then in shadow, but the arrowy pine-trunks shine in strange mottled clothing of snowy lichen and sunlit moss.

It is at this hour that we may imagine Francis first drawing near to his mountain, the crown and glory of the Franciscan heritage. He received a welcome which was calculated to make him enter it with joy, as an incorporated member of the forest brotherhood. "And drawing near to the foot of the rock of La Verna itself, it pleased S. Francis to halt awhile under an oak which was above the path, and is there to this day; resting under it, S. Francis began to take note of the situation of the place and of the country round; and as he stood thus considering, lo, there came a great multitude of birds from various parts, who by singing and flapping of wings showed the utmost joy and gladness; and they wheeled round S. Francis in such a way that some perched on his head, some on his shoulders, and some on his arms, some on his lap, and some round his feet. At sight of this, the companions and the peasant were greatly amazed; and S. Francis with great joy of heart, spoke thus: 'I believe, dearest brothers, that it is pleasing to our Lord Jesus Christ that we should dwell in this solitary mountain, since our sisters and brothers the birds show such joy at our coming.' And when he had said these words, they rose and went on; and at last they came to the place which his companions had first chosen."

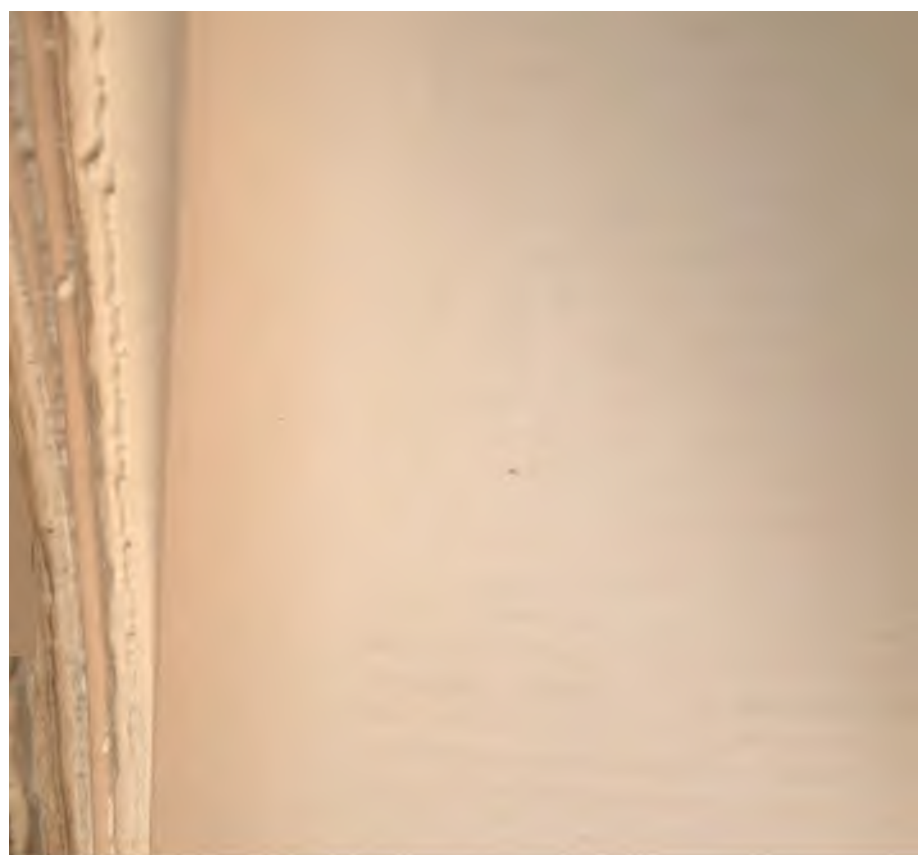
A little chapel, known as the Chapel of the Birds, marks the spot of this happy welcoming, at the foot of the last ascent to the convent, in an angle of the way.

News was at once taken to Orlando of Francis' arrival, and next morning he hastened to visit him with provisions for his entertainment. Francis was already in prayer, but not yet withdrawn from the company of the Brothers, and he received his new friend with a joy which must have amply repaid him for his gift, for Francis' joy was infectious, and his delight in the mountain was undisguised. Their mutual salutations were followed by intimate talk, and then Francis proffered his request for a rude cell at a stone's throw from the shelter of the Brothers, in which he might remain alone to pray. The place he chose was below the level of the Brothers' oratory, sheltered from their observation by a great mass of rock, and overshadowed by a magnificent beech; from it he would look out over the wide expanse of mountains to the south-west. By the time Orlando's company had put together a humble cell, evening was drawing on, and Francis, after a short address, dismissed them with his blessing. Then Orlando called the Saint and his companions aside, and exhorted them to send to his castle to supply all their needs, reminding them that bodily neces-



VIEW FROM THE CHAPEL OF THE BIRDS

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sity might well distract them from spiritual things, and assuring them that he should take it ill if they hesitated to avail themselves of his service. When he had gone, Francis set himself to counteract the possible effect of too great lavishness. "And amongst other things, he impressed upon them above all the observance of holy poverty, saying: 'Do not pay too much heed to the charitable offer of Messer Orlando, lest in anything you offend our Lady and Madonna holy Poverty. Know for certain that the more we shun poverty, the more shall we be shunned by the world and shall suffer need; but if we embrace holy poverty very closely, the world will come after us and feed us bountifully. God has called us in this holy religion for the salvation of the world, and has made this pact between us and the world: that we should set a good example to the world, and that the world should provide for us in our need. Let us then persevere in holy poverty, for it is the way of perfection and the pledge of eternal riches.'"

We have noticed that the *Fioretti* combines all incidents in the narrative of a single visit. It is plain that hitherto, and with the probable exception of the devotions outside the ruined church, our authority has been treating of the first visit to La Verna; but from this point, in the absence of documentary evidence concerning the intermediate

visits, we are no longer able to distinguish the chronology of the incidents related, and are obliged to accept the lead of the *Fioretti* in arranging all events in a consecutive sketch of Francis' last visit, culminating in the impression of the Stigmata. One incident only, related in the *Speculum Perfectionis*,¹ may be included here before we pass to the last experiences of Francis on La Verna; it plainly belongs to a time of less complete isolation from the Brothers than he observed during his farewell visit.

"One day, while he was keeping Lent in the mountain of La Verna, his companion at meal time laid the fire in the cell where he was accustomed to eat, and when the fire was kindled he went for S. Francis to another cell where he was praying, carrying with him a missal that he might read him the gospel for the day; for he always wished to hear the gospel which was read that day at mass before he ate, when he could not hear mass.

"And by the time he had come to the cell where the fire was kindled for cooking, the flames had mounted even to the roof of the cell and had set it on fire; his companion did what he could to extinguish the fire, but he could not do it alone. For blessed Francis would not help him, but took up a skin with which he was wont to cover him-

¹ *Spec. Perf.*, 117.

self by night, and went off by himself into the wood.

"Now when the brothers who were encamped a long way from that cell saw that the cell was burning, they came running from their place and put out the fire. Afterwards S. Francis came back for the meal, and after the meal he said to his companion: 'I will never have this skin over me again, for it was because of my avarice that I did not want brother Fire to burn it.'"

Brother Leo, with true artistic instinct, builds up his picture of reserves and confidences. He is as eloquent in what he withholds as in what he communicates. We get a curiously fascinating picture of the aloofness of Francis, utterly unconscious for the moment of any responsibility towards his human brother, or of any anxiety for the fabric which brother Fire was pleased to devour. Leo understood his friend too well to press him for help in quelling his favourite element: there is no request or refusal recorded, but his simple statement, "*Beatus vero Franciscus noluit juvare ipsum,*" is eloquent of past experience.

In the farewell visit to La Verna, Leo was not only the most intimate, but the sole companion of Francis, who from the beginning regarded this time as a final and almost sacramental consecration of his whole being in anticipation of approaching death.

Special provision was made by him against any intrusion from the outside world. "Brother Leo, when it seems good to him, shall bring me a little bread and a little water ; and on no account whatever are you to let any come to me that are of the world,¹ but do you answer them for me.' And when he had said these words, he gave them his blessing and went away to the beech-tree cell, and his companions remained in their place, firmly resolved to obey the commands of S. Francis." He was only too well accustomed to interruptions from the crowd of those who are always seeking a sign ; and though at La Verna he was sufficiently remote to secure him from vulgar intrusion, he no doubt anticipated some distraction from the near neighbourhood of Orlando.

This was, as it were, the first act of Francis' last drama on the mountain. He was still on the outskirts of his crowning experience, but we see that it already determined the form of his visions. One day, standing by his cell in contemplation of the great fissures and isolated rocky masses which are a striking feature of the mountain in the neighbourhood of the beech-tree cell, it seemed to Francis that they had certainly been cleft from the mountain in the hour of Christ's Passion. And it is clear from the awe and mystery with which he investec

¹ "Secolari" as opposed to "religiosi."

this conviction, that the identification of his own body with that of Christ in his sufferings was becoming daily more defined. But the absorption of Francis in contemplation of the divine grace did not weaken his human sympathies ; his insight into the thoughts and desires of the Brothers was quickened with the increasing intensity of his spiritual rapture.

He gave touching proof of his understanding when Leo, conscious of his friend's growing infirmity, was overcome during the lonely vigil by the sense of approaching desolation and loneliness, and began to crave some tangible proof of Francis' affection. Francis was swift to guess the half-defined longings of his companion, and calling him one day, bade him bring pen and ink and wrote for him the formula of blessing, still preserved at Assisi :—

*"Benedicat tibi Dominus et custodiat te ;
Ostendat faciem suam tibi et misereatur tui :
Convertat vultum suum ad te et det tibi pacem."*

And at the foot of the parchment he set a cross, in the form of the Greek TAU, adding the more intimate and personal blessing : "Dominus benedicat f. Leo te." This he gave to Leo, saying: "Dearest brother, take this paper, and keep it diligently till your death. May God bless you and guard you against all temptations. And be not dismayed if

temptations come to you, for I deem you then most a friend and servant of God, and the more you are assailed by temptations the more I love you. I tell you truly that no man ought to consider himself a perfect friend of God, till he has passed through many temptations and tribulations." And Leo's weight of depression was lifted from him, and his "temptation" suddenly departed from him.

Francis himself was not without doubts and misgivings for the family committed to him. Dissensions and signs of insurgency were already beginning to appear among the Brothers, and the bitterness was increased for Francis by his sense of growing inability to continue his personal control, the one sure corrective to their discontent.

We hear of at least one anxious questioning concerning the future of the Order, during this fast on the mountain, set at rest by an angelic apparition; it was but one of many such inward wrestlings, which during these last years must have tormented Francis.

But now the second and most strenuous act of the drama was to open. As the festival of the Assumption of the Virgin drew near, Francis began to long for a still more remote place of meditation. It is not unlikely that despite his precautions, the devout curiosity of the Brothers encroached from

time to time upon his solitude, and it is clear from the instructions given to Leo, in his choice of a new place, that Francis was particularly anxious to prevent his spiritual colloquies from being overheard. Stationing Leo at the door of the common oratory to test his success, Francis proposed to move to a point from which his voice would not carry to the shelter of the Brothers. The first choice proved still too near, but at last they discovered a place which, from its almost perilous isolation, seemed at least to promise security from intrusion. "And as they were seeking, they discovered on the side of the mountain, facing south, a secret and most fitting place for his devotions ; but it was impossible to reach it on account of a horrible and fearful cleft in the rock of great extent, across which, with great pains, they laid a plank in the manner of a bridge and crossed over." The actual spot cannot now be distinguished. It was clearly in the neighbourhood of the perpendicular southern wall of rock known as the Precipizio, which from the meadows below appears to bear the main block of convent buildings ; but the original character of the mountain in this part has been considerably modified by passages and chapels, forming a kind of setting or outer temple to the precincts which for the Franciscan family were the shrine of their most sacred mysteries. Francis' continued adherence

to this portion of the mountain is significant of the effect produced on his mind by his vision concerning its formation. He was no doubt attracted by the romantic and startling irregularity of its appearance, as also by its inaccessibility, but far more by its imagined connexion with the Passion of Christ. The spot now chosen by him for his meditations immediately overlooked a strangely rent and jagged embrasure in the mountain side, in the midst of which rises in apparent disconnexion from the surrounding rock, the remarkable fragment known as Sasso Spicco, attached to the mountain only by a disproportionately narrow base, imperceptible from above. A permanent causeway of solid masonry now bridges the chasm across which Francis had to set his plank, and it is difficult even imaginatively to isolate his rocky promontory. The curious indentations visible in the face of the precipice below his cell were impressed on it, in the imagination of his followers, by the hands and face of Francis, whom the solid rock received into itself from the assaults of the devil.

More attractive than the ministrations of brother Rock is the relationship between Francis and the falcon, who nested near to his cell, and took upon itself the office of daily alarum, refusing to leave its flapping and its song till it had made sure Francis was thoroughly roused to say matins : but

the legend, with characteristic Franciscan tenderness, endows the bird with sympathy which exalts its office above the mere exercise of clockwork precision. "And if S. Francis was more tired at one time than another, or more feeble or infirm, this falcon, like a discreet and compassionate person, would begin to sing later than usual. And so S. Francis took great pleasure in this clock; for the great watchfulness of the falcon drove from him all idleness and incited him to prayer; and beside this, sometimes by day it would sit tamely with him."

The weariness caused by his increased austerities found rest and refreshment also in heavenly music. Francis, meditating on the joy of the blessed, was filled with intense longing to share in their minstrelsy. "And as he stood wrapt in this thought, an angel appeared to him with great splendour, bearing a viol in his left hand and the bow in his right; and while S. Francis stood full of amazement at the sight of this angel, he drew the bow once across the viol; and suddenly was heard such tender melody, that the soul of Francis was filled with sweetness and deprived of every bodily feeling; so that, as he afterwards told his companions, he believed that if the angel had drawn the bow again across the strings, his soul would have fled from his body for the intoler-

able sweetness of it." Francis' heavenly visitors make music on the instrument he had most loved to imitate, when he went through the woods near Assisi, drawing a rude stick across his crooked arm, and singing to the imaginary accompaniment.

In entering upon this last period of contemplation, Francis had repeated with increased stringency his instructions against any kind of disturbance. Even Leo was no longer free to visit his master with food at such times as it might seem good to himself. He was to come once a day only, and once in the night at the hour of matins, and he was to come in silence. At the head of the bridge he should call: "Lord, open thou my lips," and if Francis replied, he was to cross over and say matins with him; if not, to depart at once. Except for their mutual devotions, the visits were to be made in silence.

One night, towards the festival of the Holy Cross, Leo went as usual to the bridge and waited for Francis' answer to his watchword; but no answer came. Overcome by the sickening sense of exclusion, which must have been growing during his enforced aloofness, and craving to support his friend in the weakness which he must have seen to be daily gaining ground—perhaps even half dreading lest a sudden transport should have snapt the frail thread which bound his soul and body—Leo

disobeyed Francis' order, and crossing the bridge entered his cell very quietly. It was empty. And Leo by the light of the moon went up into the woods and crept softly about, looking for Francis among the deep shadowy hollows of the rocks which fringe the western edge of the mountain. "And at last he heard the voice of Francis: and drawing near, he saw him on his knees in prayer, with face and hands raised to heaven: and in fervour of spirit he spoke thus: 'Who art thou, my sweetest God? What am I, thy most vile worm and useless servant?' And he continued to repeat ever these same words, and said no other thing."

We do not know what followed. Leo himself keeps silence on all these moments of intimate communion on the mountain; in his biography he never draws the veil from the reserves of this time. In a single paragraph, appended to the blessing of Francis, he records in the simplest terms the impression of the Stigmata; we do not know how far he was capable of entering—except in the sympathy of a love which was content silently to accept where it could not understand—into the mystic communion of Francis with the universal spirit and its natural manifestations; we can only gather from the account of the *Fioretti*, that an extraordinary radiance seemed to surround Francis in

this hour ; what he himself called "a light of contemplation" ; and enfolded in this light, his vision penetrated into the depths of God's infinite goodness and wisdom and power, though still across the brightness of his vision fell the shadow of his own insufficiency.

We have few recorded visions of Francis on his mountain, but many passing mentions of recurrent ecstasy : and it would be strange if, amid all his wrestlings, great peace and joy had not come to him there. Night and day are nowhere more sweetly wedded ; it is in the hour when they join hands that the deepest and most penetrating glories are revealed. Night after night Francis must have climbed from his post on the lower rock into the great solemn woods, in the hour when the beech leaves shine in transparent radiance among the gloom, and the scent of flowers is most subtly drawn from their mossy bed.

Night after night he must have out-lingered the fervent afterglow, while twilight drew her dusky veil of dewy mist across the line of purple mountains, and have watched the moon changing from gold to silvery wanness, as she rose above the pine woods, or unconscious of her motions, have welcomed her sudden radiance on his path as a divine response ; and heedless of the creeping damps, have knelt in prayer till matin twilight, as on

this night when Leo came upon him in the woods, and withdrew to watch his intercession from afar.

When the vision seemed to have departed, Leo began to return to his cell, rejoicing in the joy which he felt had been granted to Francis. "And as he was going securely on his way, S. Francis, who had heard the rustling of his feet upon the leaves, commanded him to wait for him and not to go on. Then brother Leo obediently stood still and awaited him in great fear, so that, as he afterwards told his companions, he would have rather that the earth should open on the spot and swallow him up than wait for S. Francis, who he thought would be displeased with him; for he always took great heed not to offend his fatherhood, lest, for any fault of his, S. Francis should deprive him of his company. And when S. Francis had come up with him, he asked him: 'Who art thou?' And brother Leo, all trembling, replied: 'I am brother Leo, my father.' And S. Francis said to him: 'Why didst thou come hither, my brother lamb? Did I not tell thee not to come watching me? Tell me, by holy obedience, if thou didst see or hear aught?' Brother Leo replied: 'Father, I heard thee speak and say several times: Who art thou, oh my sweetest God? What am I, thy most vile worm and useless servant?' And then Leo, falling on

his knees before S. Francis, confessed disobedience to his command, and asked his pardon with many tears. And afterwards he prayed him devoutly to explain to him the words he had heard, and to tell him those which he had not heard." Francis, with surpassing tenderness, granted his request, and shared the vision with his companion, piercing with swift intuition through the apparent neglect of his wishes to the heartsick loneliness which had prompted it. No reproof could so completely have restored the old loyalty of their relationship as this most touching sign of his confidence. Francis may even have felt that he had, in some measure, neglected his faithful companion, and have awoke with a sense almost of contrition to a realisation of his loneliness, remembering the earlier instance of his depression. So, with a crowning act of loving consideration, he let Leo continue his ministrations beyond his wont of late, bidding him bring, before his final dismissal, the book of the Gospels, that God's pleasure concerning himself might be made known by his favourite method of opening the book at random, after prayer for divine guidance. The same childish test had, in the beginning of the Order, determined the formula of the rule. It is not strange that the book opened at the subject of his constant meditation—the Passion of Christ. "For which thing it

was given him to understand that as he had followed Christ in the acts of his life, so he must follow him and be made like to him in his afflictions, and sorrows, and in his sufferings before he passed from this life." This anticipatory formulating of an event which was yet scarcely matter of speculation, need not make us dismiss the *Fioretti* as of no historical value. Despite the exuberance of the narrative, it reveals such subtle and sympathetic divination of the state of Francis' mind at this time, that these "Considerations of the holy Stigmata" are our surest guide to understanding him. The intermixture of subsequent reflexion, with the event they relate, discounts their value as a consecutive historic document, but not as an interpretation of a spiritual experience.

Francis' meditations increased in joy and an intimate realisation of God's presence. "From this point onwards he began to taste and to feel more abundantly the sweetness of divine contemplation and of divine visitations."

At last came the day of the Holy Cross, the day in which all his meditations were centred. And in the early hours before the dawn, Francis threw himself in prayer before the door of his cell, facing towards the east, and he prayed after this manner: "O my Lord Jesus Christ, two

graces I pray of Thee before I die : the first, that in my life I may feel in my soul and in my body, so far as is possible, that pain which Thou, sweet Lord, didst bear in the hour of Thy bitterest suffering ; the second is that I may feel in my heart, so far as is possible, that exceeding love by which Thou, dear Son of God, wast kindled to bear willingly so great suffering for us sinners."

This is the first recorded prayer in which Francis consciously frames the desire, that had grown with him and become a part of his being, to bear in his body "the marks of the Lord Jesus" ; and now for the first time he received the assurance of its fulfilment. "And the fervour of his devotion grew so greatly within him that he was wholly transformed into Jesus through love and compassion."

It is only with great reverence that we may venture any comment on this scene of Francis' life : to him it was undoubtedly its crown—a final pledge of union with the divine teacher to whose law his life was entirely devoted in spirit and in letter. On one side we may feel that it was the weakness of Francis, not his strength, which in its consummation on La Verna has been regarded by his followers as the convincing and incontestable proof of his sanctity ; for the impression of the Stigmata was an experience that could only have

become possible after a long period of unceasing contemplation on the physical fact which it renewed.

But we must remember that Francis' life was not passed in barren contemplation of the Passion of Christ. The image of the crucified, which he bore always in his heart, had two aspects for him—both of which find expression in the prayer just recorded—exceeding pain and exceeding love; and his life was a constant effort to combine these two aspects in himself. Thus the apparition which traditionally impressed the Stigmata on Francis is rightly figured as a winged seraph; it was the body of Christ glorified to which his own was to be conformed: his physical experience was spiritualised and raised from earth to heaven. It is impossible to express more truly this mystic relation than in the words of the *Fioretti*: "He felt exceeding joy in the precious look of Christ, who appeared to him so lovingly and gazed on him so graciously: but, on the other hand, seeing him crucified on the cross, he felt unmeasured grief from compassion. Moreover, he marvelled greatly at so fearful and unaccustomed a vision, knowing well that the infirmity of suffering is not consistent with the immortality of the seraphic spirit. And as he stood thus in wonder, it was revealed by him who appeared to him that by divine providence this vision had been shown



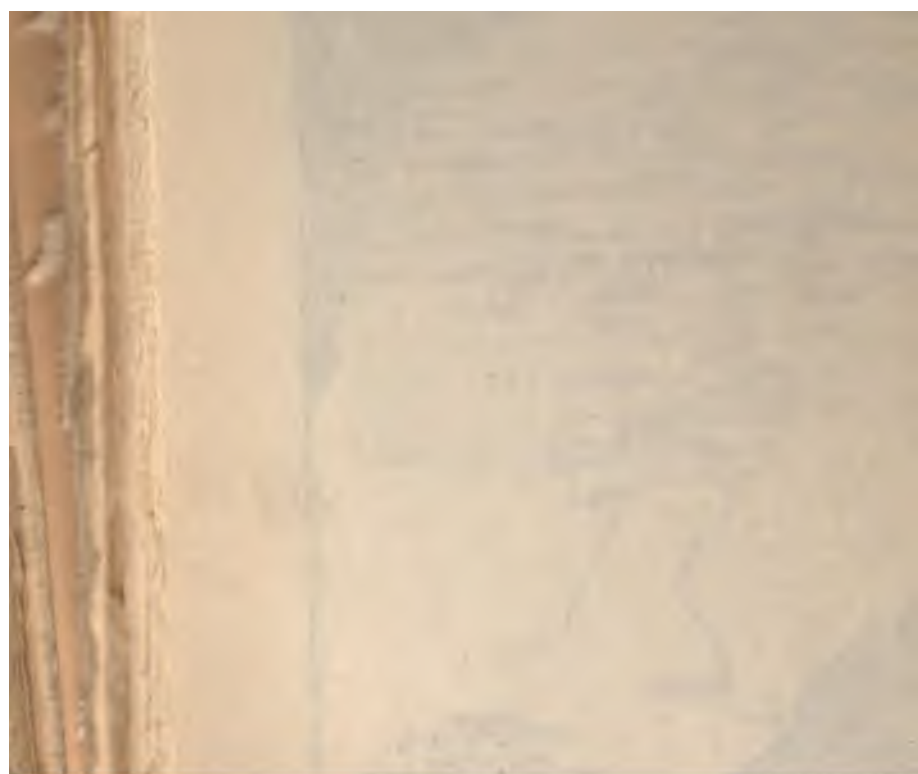
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to him in such a form ; in order that he might understand that not by martyrdom of the body, but by the illumination of his mind, he must be wholly transformed into the express image of Christ crucified as he had thus marvellously appeared to him."

And the light which shone into Francis' soul, assuring him forever of his participation in the love as in the suffering of Christ, and filling his mind with a strength and joy greater than his growing physical pains, seemed to surround La Verna, and illumine all the mountains and valleys ; the splendours of the dawn were endowed on that morning with a peculiar radiance, and when the tale was told afterwards to the shepherds, who had been watching on the country-side, they bore witness to the glory transcendent with which day broke upon the mountain.



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